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BISMARCK AND BETHMANN-HOLLWEG: A CONTRAST

BY J. HOLLAND ROSE, LITT.D.

BISMARCK once stated that a great advantage derivable from the study of history was that it enabled you to judge how far you could go with safety in any course of action. The guiding principles of his career were based on the prudential maxim: "Thus far, and no farther." To prepare the diplomatic ground carefully before taking the first step openly; to propitiate as many neutral Powers as possible; cautiously to choose the cause of quarrel and the moment for hurling the challenge; and finally to end the war quickly with the minimum of exasperation to doubtful neutrals—such were the mainsprings of the policy of the Iron Chancellor. Rightly considered, that policy was remarkable less for rigidity than for suppleness. It was a chain, not a rod. It could therefore adapt itself to swift and perplexing turns, as when, in July, 1866, Prussia accorded surprisingly easy terms to her defeated enemies, Austria and the South German States, in order to be able to rally the whole of the German people against the threatening muster of the French troops Rhinewards. Then it was that Bismarck's "pen," Herr Abeken, set down on paper the Bismarckian saying: "Moderation in victory is greater than victory itself."

It would seem that the men now about Kaiser Wilhelm II have not studied history, or only in the Teutonized version handed down as a curse to this generation by that Prussianized Slav, Treitschke. That professional pamphleteer, whose deafness cut him off from intercourse with his fellows, lived in a kind of Prussian Valhalla aglow with the glories of Königgratz and Sedan; and the present generation of Germans, including the Kaiser himself, has drunk

deep of the heady mixture there served out in the skulls of the vanquished, forgetting that those glories were won as much by brain as by muscle, by wise statecraft more than by forceful strategy.

Let us consider briefly Bismarck's policy during the Franco-German War of 1870-1. Even at the height of the triumphs of German arms the Chancellor used his utmost endeavors to keep on friendly terms with Russia. He did not rely alone on the firm friendship of the Czar Alexander II for his uncle, Wilhelm I of Prussia. He let it be known at Petrograd that the Berlin Government would support Russia's effort to get rid of the irritating restrictions imposed upon her at the close of the Crimean War. The device succeeded; and the sympathy of the Russian people with France in her dire misfortunes was of no avail. Bismarck kept her isolated while the German armies completed their triumphs; and then he imposed terms which, though severe, were not impossible. For instance, he counseled the abandonment of the German claim to Belfort, as being an entirely French city, and if he had had his way, he would probably have handed back Metz for the same reason, exacting, however, an extra 1,000,000,000 francs in order to build another fortress in German territory somewhere to the east of that city. He was overruled by Moltke and the German General Staff, who are therefore responsible for inflicting on France an irreparable wound. His conduct of the negotiations combined the qualities of commonsense and firmness, of hardness and courtesy. He kept his demands entirely secret and let the more garrulous French negotiators, Thiers and Favre, disclose their hand. He held the winning cards; but he rendered victory more certain by reticence beforehand, by cautious reserve during the game, and by decisive pressure at the climax.

Only on one topic did he manifest passion and resentment. Any hint of a possible intervention by one of the neutral Powers made him furious. After Sedan he expressed entire sympathy with the following pronouncement of the Swabian *Mercury*. "We (Germans) mean to dictate in Paris the conditions which will protect the German people from the renewal of a burglarious attack like this war of 1870; and no diplomatist of the foreign Powers who kept their arms folded shall dictate to us respecting those conditions. Those who have done nothing have no business to

interfere." Bismarck also declared that any attempt at intervention or mediation by a neutral world would instantly be rejected; for, though it might begin with good intentions it was certain to make bad blood. M. Thiers, during his mission to the neutral capitals, had striven hard to bring about intervention by one or more of the neutrals; but the Iron Chancellor frustrated his hopes at one point. During the final discussions on the Preliminaries of Peace in February, 1871, Bismarck discovered that the Gladstone Cabinet was about to make an effort to lower the German demands for a war indemnity from six to five milliards of francs (i. e., down to £200,000,000). Thereupon he blazed out against Thiers and Favre: "I see very well that you are only aiming at recommencing the war; and in doing so you will enjoy the advice and support of your friends the English." It was in these days that he called the English "swine"; and the incident (which ended in the remission of the milliard by Germany) produced a very bitter feeling in the Fatherland against the British Government and nation. It is well that benevolent neutrals, who intend to offer their mediation with a view to the opening of peace negotiations, should realize the extreme difficulty of the task of mediator. Any neutral Power which is directly concerned in the questions at issue is certain to be suspected of bias and favoritism; while one that is not at all concerned in them will be scouted as a meddlesome outsider. The article and the retort just quoted are thoroughly typical of the treatment accorded to a mediator. The greater the complexity and importance of the dispute the more surely will his offer be rejected by one party. The indispensable condition for success in mediation is that both sides should equally desire it and should be equally convinced of the absolute impartiality and good faith of him who proposes it; but, as a rule, the mediator ends his difficult and thankless duties amidst the furious objurgations of one side and the skillfully concealed satisfaction of the other.

Now, contrast the quiet disdain of Bismarck at the mere thought of any neutral daring to suggest mediation, with the fussy elaboration of Germany's recent schemes, both in the New World and the Old World, to lead up to some offer of mediation. First it is the Pope, then it is President Wilson, or else it is some vague concert of the European neutrals, which is to set moving the delicate machinery.

Contrast the stern "Hands off!" of Bismarck in the winter of 1870-1 with the meticulous care of Bethmann-Hollweg to ensure the offer of the olive branch by some benevolent and unsuspecting neutral. The situation is not wanting in a certain piquant irony. The Government at Berlin, which scouted all the proposals of arbitration and limitation of armaments put forward at the Hague Congresses or by the British Admiralty, now seems to be undergoing a death-bed repentance. After losing, on its own confession, nearly 4,000,000 men in killed, wounded and prisoners, it is said to favor restriction of armaments which a sum in rule of three could formerly have applied to Germany and the other Powers on terms far more advantageous to her than those which her policy of blood and iron now render necessary. How the shades of Bismarck and Moltke must haunt the Wilhelmstrasse! How their feeble and infatuated successors must reflect that those founders of the Empire abased France and exalted Germany at the cost of under 30,000 Germans killed, wounded and prisoners; while Wilhelm II and his paladins have flung away or incapacitated 4,000,000 men in order to secure the ruin of their Empire. Well may the Kaiser and Bethmann-Hollweg have desired to devolve on some neutral the task of beginning to extricate them from the hopeless mess into which their ambition and folly plunged them. That the proudest sovereign in Europe and his still more presumptuous heir should have had recourse to round-about means for securing some kind of intervention must be gall and wormwood to men who have flouted peace and exalted war.

Imagination falters at the task of picturing the Berseker fury of Bismarck if he could revisit the scenes of his diplomatic triumphs. The triumphs were assured beforehand by a far-seeing policy which aimed at strengthening the diplomatic position of Germany and isolating her enemy. By all conceivable means he strove to stop the formation of hostile coalitions. The mere thought of them was "a nightmare" to him; and by a prudent regimen succeeded in averting them. The Franco-Russian alliance dates informally from the year 1891, the year after his dismissal by the present Kaiser; and that alliance was a direct consequence of his dismissal. In his closing years he saw the Kaiser and subservient Chancellors reverse the fundamental aims of the Bismarckian régime. He himself had resisted as long as

possible the new Teutonic mania for colonies; in 1896 he saw the Kaiser adopt world-policy as his motto. His closing days in 1898 were troubled by discussions concerning the first of the great Navy laws which, as he foretold, bred discord with England. A kindly fate carried him off in July, 1898, a few months before the Kaiser proceeded to Constantinople and Damascus in order to inaugurate the pro-Moslem policy and the Eastern ventures which the great Chancellor had always deprecated. Above all, the new fangled habits of lavish ostentation and oriental subservience at Court (dubbed Byzantinism) were odious to the plain and sturdy Brandenburg squire; for they told against that restrained and moderate demeanor which he inculcated alike on the citizen, the courtier and the State. He left it on record that his political aim since 1871 had ever been "to weaken the bad feeling which has been caused through our growth to the position of a Great Power, by the honorable and peaceful use of our influence, and so convince the world that a German hegemony in Europe is more useful and less partisan and also less harmful for the freedom of others than that of France, Russia, or England." So, too, Mr. Sidney Whitman, long the correspondent of the *New York Herald* at Berlin, reports Bismarck as saying in his old age:

No cock of the walk business! Europe as an entity would resent a situation so derogatory as that an individual (obviously Wilhelm II) should arrogate to himself the attribute of being supreme arbiter of war and peace, the latter to depend upon his benevolent intentions periodically vouchsafed to the world as a free gift to be received in an attitude of grateful humility.¹

The present Kaiser and his last two Chancellors (Bülow and Bethmann-Hollweg) have deliberately thrown Bismarck's policy to the winds. They have given in to the extreme demands both of the German colonial party and the German Navy League. The Kaiser's Balkan policy and his Bagdad and Hedjaz railway schemes alarmed and irritated Russia, France and England; so that those old rivals became friends in order to make head against enterprises that equally menaced all three Powers. Germany, strong in her alliances with Austria and Italy, and supported by Rou-

¹ *Bismarck, Some Reflections and Reminiscences*, Volume II.: S. Whitman, *Things I Remember*.

mania, Bulgaria and Turkey, screamed out against the alleged "encircling" policy of King Edward VII; yet at every crisis (1906, 1908-9, 1912-13) she browbeat the Entente Powers. Her conduct would have produced war in any one of those crises if the Entente Powers had not given way. A repetition of similar conduct at Berlin, in still more overbearing fashion, in July-August, 1914, produced the present conflict. Bethmann-Hollweg is credited with having striven for peace even then. If so, his hand was forced by the military party at Berlin; and his whole conduct at that crisis and subsequently resembles that of a man who has lost his head and has plunged feverishly into paths that he knows not, in company with masterful comrades who compel him to speak the jargon of the barracks. His utter loss of temper at the last interview with the British Ambassador in Berlin, his mad clutch at that unlucky phrase "the scrap of paper," and his final surrender to the men who demanded more submarine horrors and more Zeppelin atrocities, bespeak the man who has lost his nerve, his judgment, and his self-respect. Bismarck often spoke with passion; but the passion was under the control of a masterful will and always served some political end.

The only excuse for Bethmann-Hollweg's retention of office is that he hopes to avert the accession of mere madmen like Tirpitz. But in order to cling to office he has had to blurt out Chauvinist sentiments like the following: "If Europe shall come to peace it can only be possible by the inviolable and strong position of Germany . . . Germany must so consolidate, strengthen and secure her position that other Powers can never again think of a policy of isolation (August 19th, 1915)." As if the Entente Powers ever thought of "isolating" an Empire which up to August, 1914, had the alliance of Austria, Italy and the general support of Bulgaria, Roumania and Turkey! As if the Entente between England and France, England and Russia, were not the outcome of the "inviolable and strong position of Germany," which at every crisis emboldened her to act as cock of the walk! As if lasting peace could ever result from the rise of a great military Empire to a supremacy which must never be challenged—and that, too, under a vain and touchy man like the Kaiser! Was there ever a more signal reversal of Bismarck's notion of a quiet, dignified and conservative supremacy for Germany?

Or again, take the furious assertion of Bethmann-Hollweg (the former friend of peace) to the Reichstag on September 28th, 1916, that any German statesman who opposed the use of the utmost rigors of submarine and Zeppelin warfare against England would deserve to be hanged. The phrase brought down thunders of applause even from the Junkers who sought to overthrow him. Bismarck never resorted to so hysterical a method of clinging to his seat. A man employing those devices may qualify for political tight-rope balancing; but he forfeits respect by such a surrender of the most elementary principles of humanity to the exigencies of party strife. Bismarck, even when hard pressed by party combinations, never stooped to such acrobatic distortions. In order to excuse them, Bethmann-Hollweg paraded once more the old tale that the war had, from the very first day, been "nothing but the defense of our right to existence and freedom"; and he arraigned England as the persistent violator of international laws, the fiercest of all Germany's foes, determined to enslave first the Germans and then her own allies whom she was selfishly bleeding to death. All this and much else of the same kind the *Vorwärts* unkindly characterized as "the stereotyped rhetoric to which we are as much accustomed as we are to the well-known ever-recurring phrases of the official war reports or the not more original exhortations and promises of the War Nutrition Office." It is clear that the official game of pumping in hatred in order to keep up war energy is nearing its end. The falsification of facts is too gross, the subterfuge too shallow. Yet, even amidst this ferocious bombast the Chancellor inserted some words commiserating France on her horrible losses and insinuating that the aims of Germany were identical with those outlined recently by M. Briand, the French Premier, namely, to form "international agreements" [which] would "protect the freedom of nations from enemy attack." So the author of the "scrap of paper" theory concerning international agreements had the effrontery to declare that Germany's aim in the war is the formation of international agreements safeguarding nations from attack. In vain does he don the garb of the peace-maker. The world knows full well why the violator of Belgium in August, 1914, adopted these mellifluous tones in September, 1916. The loss of half a million Germans north of Verdun, the loss of another half million on the Somme, and

the deepening resolve of the Allies to exact full reparation for all the havoc, all the atrocities for which Germany and her subordinates are responsible—these considerations alone wrung from the Chancellor a belated and unreal homage to international law. But let him and his master be assured that the first step of the Allies in entering on negotiations for peace will be to require that every German, Austrian, Turkish and Bulgarian official responsible for the hideous outrages that have disgraced this war shall be put on trial before an impartial tribunal. Then and then only will the hierarchy of Berlin understand the meaning of international law. Then only will “the freedom of nations from every attack” be secure.

And what are we to say to the singular speech of Bethmann-Hollweg on December 12th, 1916, in which he announced the readiness of Germany to open negotiations for peace? Does it breathe the quiet confidence of assured triumph? Are its statements correct? Does it hold the promise of a just and durable peace? The shouts of indignant surprise from all quarters are sufficient evidence of the failure of the German scheme. Bethmann-Hollweg has achieved the rare distinction of having cemented more closely the union of the Allies by equally disgusting them all.

The Kaiser's recent move was probably designed in order to breathe new heart into his wavering allies and his questioning or dispirited subjects. The Nemesis of a policy of force and braggadocio, maintained ever since the Damascus episode of 1898, is now at hand. Rejecting the wise and prudent policy of Bismarck, which made Germany great, he has adopted courses of action which have alienated Russia, alarmed Great Britain, and kept Europe in perpetual ferment. He has piled armament on armament in order to browbeat his neighbors, and has seen them resort in self-defense to similar means. While bewailing the “encircling” of Germany, he has built up the most threatening series of alliances that the world has ever known, and has raged against his neighbors when they adopted the tentative and wholly defensive system of Ententes, which, up to 1914, he was able to overbear. Too vain to take to heart the failure of his sinister designs (if he really meant to keep the peace), he has massed force upon force, threat upon threat, in the belief that the unquestioned domination of Germany would impose peace on a cowed Europe; and Europe has now re-

torted upon him the consequences of a Napoleonic policy which needed a Napoleon to carry through to even an ephemeral triumph. The fault belongs primarily to the Kaiser; for, since the dismissal of Bismarck, he has chosen Chancellors rather for their subservience than their ability. But it is certain that Bethmann-Hollweg has shown exceptional infelicity in the choice both of *mots* and methods. At every point in the diplomatic game he has stumbled upon phrases that confound his friends and amuse or exasperate his enemies; while his diplomacy will pass to posterity as a signal contrast to that which made Prussia great in 1864-1870; for he has divided his allies and has united the loose group of the Entente into the greatest and firmest league known to history. Where he has triumphed it has been due to the organization of the German military machine and the pathetic bravery of millions of Germans who have marched staunchly to death and wounds, believing the official lie that this is "a defensive war." When the whole hideous truth shall be known throughout Germany and Austria there will probably come an upheaval such as the world has not seen since the French Revolution. For the war is now known by all impartial students to be a well prepared offensive effort of the Central Empires to secure political supremacy. That effort might have succeeded if the Kaiser and his counsellors had possessed abilities equal to the task of directing wisely the diplomatic, military and naval resources which they had long been accumulating. But they were pigmies beside the monstrous mass; and the verdict which history will pass on their vain contortions will be:

"Strength, mindless, falls by its own weight."

J. HOLLAND ROSE.